

“The Practice of Peace”
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What would bring you peace right now?
A greater amount of money?
A more fulfilling job?
A new place to live?
A loving relationship with a specific person?
To be ten years younger?
Being more beautiful, thinner, or taller?
To be enlightened?

Anything that you do not currently possess,
Anything you are not *right now*,
Does not exist in this moment.

As long as you choose to hold on to the desire for something you do not currently possess or to be something you are not – you will never be at peace.

As long as you choose to believe that something outside of yourself will bring you peace, you cannot experience peace.

Let go. Be at peace.¹

That is the advice of Scott Shaw, the Buddhist author who wrote our opening words this morning.

When I first sat down on Friday morning to start writing this sermon, I was not at peace.

I had just made arrangements to get my lap-top back after having been without it for exactly a week. It had been a very busy week, filled with meetings and late nights, and little time to plan or reflect. And a big dump truck from a local nursery was on its way to dump a cord of firewood in our driveway... firewood that would need to be moved by hand before the end of the day so that we could get our cars in the driveway.

On top of all of that, someone here in Harvard had just the day before disrupted what peace I had by making a frightful set of predictions about the future of the global economy. You know who you are. And, of course, world news of late has not been exactly cheerful or inspiring of hope.

¹ Shaw, Scott, *About Peace*, Boston: Red Wheel, 2001, p. 1.

So, there I was trying to write a sermon on the 6th principle of the Unitarian Universalist Association...the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all...and feeling utterly distracted by the state of the world and the state of my week. My mind was awash in a puddle of anxiety with a splash of fear and a few sprinkles of worry.

What I thought I needed to feel peace again was a laptop, a completed sermon, and a neatly stacked cord of wood. And three extra days in my week, and someone to walk the restless dogs, and someone to buy a gallon of milk and some bananas, both of which were running low. Oh. And to be more enlightened. Then I would have been fine.

As I said, I was far from at peace.

Lao Tzu once said that if we want peace in the world, we first have to have peace in the home, and to have peace in the home, we must have peace in our hearts. And I know that when I get this way...when I have less peace in my mind and heart, there is sure to be less peace in the home. I know that I am less patient with my spouse and our two-year old, and I am less relaxed, less creative, less resilient, more defensive, more physically stressed, and generally not as fun to be around.

And in that state of mind, how can I possibly contribute to creating a more peaceful world?

This is not just me, right? This is all of us. This is our lives, our busy, busy lives. Our busy, stress-filled lives in a time of increased anxiety...an era of terrorist threats, wars, political, economic, and climate instability... It's sometimes hard to imagine how we're going to get out of all of this mess we're in.

Martha Nussbaum, professor of law and ethics at the University of Chicago, has written,

“We live in a time of fear...[and]... Fear narrows the moral imagination, making it difficult to view with sympathy the situation of people who live at a distance or who look different from ourselves. Fear leads to polarization...fear constructs a simpler world, a world that consists of the vulnerable yet all-important Us and the dark, besieging Them.”²

That is how fear so easily leads us away from peace and into conflict.

How do we make peace in the world if we can't even find peace ourselves?

Perhaps Lao Tzu was right. We have to start with where we are. We have to start with our minds and hearts. The Dalai Lama said as much. Even UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization is on board, making a claim in the preamble to its charter, which reads...

² Nussbaum, Martha, “Liberal Education and Global Community,” in *Liberal Education*, Winter 2004, 42.

“Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the foundations of peace must be constructed.” ... Therefore, “if we are to be peacemakers, then we must learn to be peace thinkers.”³

And as Buddhist teacher and eco-philosopher, Joanna Macy has written:

“To heal our society, our psyches must heal as well. The military, social, and environmental dangers that threaten us do not come from sources outside the human heart; they are reflections of it, mirroring the fears, greeds, and hostilities that separate us from ourselves and each other. For our sanity and our survival, therefore, it appears necessary to engage in spiritual as well as social change, to merge the inner with the outer paths. But how, in practical terms, do we go about this?”⁴

I have found that in trying to answer that question, it’s helpful to look at how our human brains work.

Neurologist, Richard Restak, author of *The Brain Has a Mind of Its Own*, once described the human brain as a “three-pound mass of protoplasm with the consistency of an over ripe avocado.” As many writers have pointed out, the human brain is really three different brains, which work both independently and together.

The largest, the neo-cortex, is what we might call the “thinking brain.” This is the part of the brain that holds our capacity for paying attention, navigating through complexity, and solving problems.

The next is the limbic system or “feeling brain.” It is sometimes also referred to as the Mammalian brain. This is the part that holds our emotions. It also helps to regulate our blood pressure, our temperature, our immune system, and our sugar levels.

This part of the brain allows us to bond with others and to play and to create community. It also is the part that engages in some of the activities we often refer to as “thinking,” activities such as “rationalizing,” “remembering,” and “worrying,” all of which – although they seem like thinking, are really rooted in emotion and not in higher-thinking or problem solving.

As Scott Shaw has noted...

The human mind loves to recall negative emotions.
The human mind loves to dream up negative situations that may or may not happen.
The human mind loves to fantasize about possibilities.

Do you do this?
Many people do.

³ Reardon, Betty A., *Comprehensive Peace Education*, New York: Teachers College Press, 1988, 55.

⁴ Macy, Joanna, “Taking Heart: Spiritual Exercises from Social Activists,” in *Peace is the Way* (ed. Walter Wink), New York: Orbis, p. 135.

How many times have you remembered something that angered you and felt your heart begin to pump harder, had your blood pressure go up, and lost all your inner peace?

How many times have you repeated this peace-disturbing pattern as you began to imagine some negative event that might occur?⁵

That is our limbic brain.

The smallest – and the oldest, and the one that develops first in fetuses – is the “reactive” or “reptilian” brain. Among other things, this one controls our survival processes. It helps to preserve the organism when faced with an immediate stressor. It is where the instincts of “fight” and “flight” reside.

Typically, when stress and anxiety are high, we tend to act more out of our reptilian brain. The scope of our vision narrows. We see fewer details. We miss the big picture. We see less of what is here and now. We focus on the threat. We become less thoughtful and reflective and more reactive. We speak before thinking. We act without planning. We do what our reptilian brain tells us we need to do to survive. Sometimes we lash out.

When the mammalian brain gets involved, our emotional state will become highly excited, and the automatic reactivity of the reptilian brain is reinforced by the emotions of fear and angry and by the so-called “thinking” that is rationalization. Together, these two lower brains work to help ensure the survival of the individual and the species as a whole.

The neo-cortex, in the meantime, is the seat of executive function; it has the veto power. It can override the others. It can say no. It can set limits and provide a measure of self-control. But it is not automatic, and in times of stress, its functions are less easy to access than those of the other two brains. “Once provoked to a furious state of self-preservation, the feeling brain can issue directive force for hours, being resistant to an immediate switch to cortical thinking.”⁶

Joanna Macy’s question again is essentially “How do we, in practical terms, engage in spiritual as well as social change to heal our psyches as well as our world?” and, not by accident, she asks this question in an essay about spiritual practices for the social activist.

It’s interesting to think about spiritual practices, such as meditation, in light of what we know about the brain and how it responds to perceived threats. Meditation – of whatever kind – is meant in large part to calm us down and to help us feel centered.

What it really seems to do though is to lift us up out of our reptilian and mammalian brains and into the neo-cortex, the place of attention to what is now...the present moment...not regret about the past or dread of the future. And what spiritual practices like meditation also do, in effect, is work to strengthen the veto power of the neo-cortex so that it can stop the reptilian and limbic brains from running away out of control.

⁵ Shaw, 13.

⁶ Steinke, Peter, *Healthy Congregations*, Alban Institute, 2006, 66.

And this has a survival function, too, it turns out, especially in a complex and rapidly changing world which requires us to adapt quickly to solve new problems and challenges us not to rely on old responses in new situations. There was a time in our evolutionary history when fighting was probably one of the two best responses to threat. But with technology being what it is now, that old response could actually not only get us killed but destroy civilization as well. It's time to learn a new way.

As Deepak Chopra writes in his book *Peace is the Way*:

“To end war, you have to think of ending not just one conflict, and not just thirty. What we have to end is the idea of war, which has turned into the habit of war, and then into the numbing constancy of war...”

“This...is about erasing that [old] groove and substituting a new way to respond when we are very afraid or very angry, or even when we aren't. The way of peace has to become a new habit.”⁷

He offers a very simple seven-day peace program, “seven practices for peace” to help us become better peacemakers. Each practice takes only a few minutes.

On Sunday, he suggests that we simply BE for peace, that we take 5 minutes to meditate for peace. That we sit quietly and repeat these four words: “Peace, Harmony, Laughter, Love.” He suggests that we take a moment at the end of our meditation to bring to mind someone against whom we hold a grievance...and that we send that person our forgiveness.

On Monday, Chopra asks us to THINK for peace, that we “introduce the intention of peace in [our] thoughts.” Sit in silence and repeat the ancient Buddhist prayer:

Let me be loved, let me be happy, let me be peaceful
Let my friends be happy, loved, and peaceful
Let my perceived enemies be happy, loved, and peaceful
Let all beings be happy, loved, and peaceful.
Let the whole world experience these things

On Tuesday, he suggests that we FEEL for peace and experience the emotions of peace, which are compassion, understanding and love.

“Compassion is the feeling of shared suffering. When you feel someone else's suffering, understanding is born. Understanding is the knowledge that suffering is shared by everyone. When you understand that you aren't alone in your suffering, there is the birth of love.”

And so, observe a stranger during the day and silently say to yourself: “This person is just like me. Like me, this person has experienced joy and sorrow, despair and hope, fear and

⁷ Chopra, Deepak, *Peace is the Way: Bringing War and Violence to an End*, New York: Three Rivers Press, 2005, 2-3.

love. Like me, this person has people in his or her life who deeply care for and love him or her. Like me, this person's life is impermanent and will one day end. This person's peace is as important as my peace. I want peace, harmony, laughter, and love in his or her life and the life of all beings."

The practice on Wednesday is to SPEAK for Peace..."to refrain from complaints, condemnation, and criticism," and to do at least one of the following:

- Tell someone how much you appreciate him or her.
- Express genuine gratitude to those who have helped and loved you.
- Offer healing or nurturing words to someone who needs them.
- Show respect to someone whose respect you value.

"If you find that you are reacting negatively to anyone, in a way that isn't peaceful, refrain from speaking and keep silent. Wait to speak until you feel centered and calm, and then speak with respect."

On Thursday, we ACT for Peace. We help someone in need. We try to bring a smile to a stranger's face. We offer to help without asking for recognition or thanks.

Friday we CREATE for Peace. We "come up with at least one creative idea to resolve a conflict, either in [our] personal life or [our] family circle or among friends." And then we ask someone else close to you to do the same. We come up with something together. We might "change an old habit that isn't working, look at someone a new way, offer words [we] never offered before, or think of an activity that brings people together in good feeling and laughter."

And then finally, as the week comes to a close on Saturday, Chopra asks us to SHARE for Peace...to share this practice with two people and invite them to begin practicing peace, too.

"The seven practices for peace are simple [he says], but when followed on a mass scale, their power is potentially unlimited.

Even if you don't immediately see a decline in violence around the world, you will know in your heart that you have dedicated your own life to peace. The single best reason to become a peacemaker is that every other approach has failed... Right now there are 21.3 million soldiers serving in armies around the world. Can't we recruit a peace brigade ten times larger? A hundred times larger? The project begins now, with you." (29)

We do have a choice to make...every day of every precious week, no matter what befalls us. To be intentional and practice, for although practice may not make us perfect, it is guaranteed to make us better. As Chopra has written,

"Fear and greed emanate from a lower level of consciousness, a level we all participate in. Love and sharing emanate from a higher level of consciousness, also one in which we all participate. The critical question, then, is which level you want to give your allegiance to." (16-17)

And which one *will* you make your practice. It's truly up to us. For as long as we choose to believe that someone or something outside of us will bring peace to us or to our families or to the world around us, we will not experience peace.

May we find the peace we seek, within and around us.
Amen. And Blessed Be.